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Forest Service Announces Decision on Collaborative Restoration Project

RUSSELLVILLE, Ark. -- Forest managers have announced a decision on the Bearcat Hollow Phase II project, which encompasses approximately 38,000 acres of the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests in Pope, Newton and Searcy Counties, AR.

The project was designed to promote forest health, restore certain areas of the forest suffering from oak decline, and improve wildlife habitat. An initial public scoping letter was mailed to interested members of the public and partner agencies in mid-2011 describing the actions proposed in the area. As a result of public input from scoping, additional alternatives were developed and presented for public comment in December 2011. A final Decision Notice and finding of no significant impact was issued in June 2012.

According to Jim Dixon, Integrated Resources Team Leader on the Big Piney Ranger District, there are no “one size fits all” solutions for the unique area. “We have many tools to choose from,” he said. “This isn’t like painting a wall with a broad brush...it’s more like a stained glass window, where each piece is unique and requires special attention.”

The Proposed Action selected by forest managers includes harvesting timber to increase herbaceous vegetation for wildlife, and to improve overall health and diversify the ages of trees in some of the project area; prescribed burning in conjunction with restoration thinning to increase wildlife and herbaceous species numbers, richness, and diversity; treatment of invasive non-native species which compete against native wildlife food sources by applying and monitoring the effects of herbicide in selected areas; creation of wildlife openings and water sources; restoration of native cane and glade areas; and construction, reconstruction and closure of some existing roads.

All actions outlined in the Proposed Action will adhere to Arkansas Best Management Practices (BMPs) and standards and guidelines of the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests Resource and Land Management Plan (FLRMP). Impacts resulting from management actions, such as sedimentation or smoke, will be temporary and within state and forest parameters.

Bearcat Hollow Phase II is part of the larger, landscape scale Arkansas/Missouri Pine-Oak Woodland Restoration Partnership and will connect areas being restored on public lands managed by the two states and federal agencies. A number of other state agencies and non-

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Press Release – Bearcat Hollow Phase II
Page Two

governmental organizations are partners in restoring the unique area. Located adjacent to private lands and the Gene Rush Wildlife Management Area (WMA), the project is important for restoring and maintaining habitat for wildlife species including deer, turkey, elk, and many other game and non-game species.

Dixon said research has indicated that restoration projects such as this one can increase the number of existing species from 7-10 per acre to 75+ per acre. That number is consistent with monitoring conducted in other Big Piney Ranger District restoration areas. Species across the broad spectrum are expected to increase including vegetative and herbaceous species, amphibians, insects, reptiles, songbirds, and other game and non-game species.

Public involvement was instrumental in shaping the final decision. Two issues studied in detail as a result of public feedback during the official comment period were herbicide use and the creation of wildlife openings. According to Dixon, herbicide will only be used at minimal levels, but are an accentual part of the management plan to reach both the restoration and desired future condition goals for this project.

“We will closely monitor the effects of herbicide application and water quality in the areas we treat,” he said. “In areas where non-native invasive species are present, we know from experience that manual treatments and prescribed burning won’t work to control these prolific species. If left unchecked they will continue to spread throughout restoration areas and the project in general.”

Additionally, wildlife openings greater than 20 acres will incorporate strips of trees across them to break them up visually where practical.

Other actions withheld or modified by the Decision Notice that differ from the initial actions proposed in mid-2011 and the Proposed Action presented in late 2011 include deferring construction of 41 miles of horse trails and two day-use parking areas until a later time, and limiting the acres that can be prescribed burned between April 15th and June 15th to no more than 25% (3,448 acres) of the total acres to be prescribed burned (13,792) over any 5 year period.

An analysis of the road system throughout the project area revealed the need for construction, reconstruction and maintenance on some roadways, decommissioning of 6 miles of road and closure of 20 miles due to continuing erosion, safety concerns and unnecessary wildlife disturbance.

The Bearcat Hollow Phase II project is now subject to appeal by people who provided substantive comments during the official 30 day comment period. For more information on this decision, log on to <http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/osfnf/landmanagement/planning/?cid=stelprdb5212180>. To find out if you are eligible to file an appeal, contact the Big Piney Ranger District at (870) 446-5122 or email at mmulford@fs.fed.us.

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